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FOR WHA/CEN AND WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [CU](#) [HO](#)
SUBJECT: CUBAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO HONDURAS FINALLY
TRIGGERS SELECTION OF NEW AMBASSADOR

Classified By: AMB. CHARLES FORD. REASON 1.4(B).

11. (U) SUMMARY. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque filled his two-day visit to Honduras with the inauguration of a hospital specializing in ophthalmology, a visit with President Zelaya, the signing of three agreements to bring the two countries closer together, and a visit with local supporters of the Cuban regime. President Zelaya used the visit to finally announce the new Honduran ambassador to Cuba. Zelaya surprised everyone by selecting an unknown agriculture expert with no diplomatic experience for the position. The newly selected ambassador, Juan Ramon Elvir Salgado, worked for Zelaya in the 1990s in the government agency FHIS, and admitted that he once admired Fidel Castro and the socialist aims of the Cuban government but now states that his sole job is to represent the people of Honduras. The trip by the Cuban Foreign Minister marks a growing friendship between Honduras and Cuba and the ties between the two countries are expected to strengthen in the coming years. END SUMMARY.

Foreign Minister's Visit

12. (U) Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque began his two-day visit to Honduras on February 28 with the inauguration of a hospital specializing in ophthalmology in the department El Paraiso. The hospital was donated by the Cuban government and began operation in 2001 providing general medical care to the predominantly agriculture area. The Cuban government recently donated the specialty equipment that will allow the hospital to perform up to thirty eye surgeries a day.

13. (U) During the inauguration, Roque described the upcoming "Operation Miracle", a two-year plan to send Cuban doctors to twenty-one countries in Latin American and the Caribbean to treat over 500,000 patients. He also stated the Cuban government will donate two additional hospitals to Honduras later this year. Like this one in El Paraiso, the two new hospitals will be located in the countryside of the departments of Ocotepeque and Olancho to serve the poor. Roque claimed the new hospitals will treat 25,000 patients a year. Quoting from Cuban patriot, Jose Marti, Roque told the Honduran audience that although their two countries are separated geographically, they share a unified culture, history, and challenges for the future.

14. (U) Roque spent his second day in Tegucigalpa meeting with President Zelaya and the Honduran Foreign Minister Milton Jimenez where they signed three separate agreements to further deepen the relationship between the two countries. One agreement dealt with the removal of visa requirements for

diplomatic passports; the second allows for the permanent presence of Cuban doctors and teachers in Honduras; and the third related to the demarcation of the maritime boundary between Honduras and Cuba. Highlighting these agreements as signs of a new era of cooperation, Roque invited Honduran businessmen to visit Havana to investigate ways of increasing trade.

15. (U) Roque also took time to pay tribute to the Honduran hero Francisco Morazan and to Jose Marti. He laid a wreath of flowers at the foot of the statute of Francisco Morazan in front of the Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCEI) and later met with dozens of Cuban supporters and sympathizers at Plaza Cuba (a small concrete "park" located in the cloverleaf of a busy intersection). While at Plaza Cuba he met with Honduran students who had studied in Cuba and was presented with a picture of Jose Marti by the Cuban supporters who also expressed their wishes for a quick recovery of Fidel Castro. Roque spoke of the strengthening ties between Honduras and Cuba, the desire to see an increase in tourism and Cuba's desire to provide more help to Honduras, especially teachers to improve the literacy rate in the countryside.

The New Ambassador to Cuba

16. (U) After months of rumors and public statements by administration officials who did not want the job, President Zelaya picked a technocrat with no diplomatic experience to be the new Honduran ambassador to Cuba. Juan Ramon Elvir Salgado (Elvir), DPOB: 30 August 1953 in Francisco Morazan, is an agricultural engineer who worked for Fondo Hondureno de Inversion Social (FHIS) in a number of positions during the mid-1990s when Zelaya was the agency director. Following his

work at FHIS, Elvir spent six years working for government agencies on projects to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, and most recently served on the board of auditors for the Honduran state-run electrical company, ENEE. Elvir studied agriculture at the Universidad Nacional Autonomia de Honduras (UNAH) where he later taught and worked in administrative positions. He later received a doctorate in agricultural sciences from the "Friendship University of the People of Russia" in Moscow. He is married to another UNAH professor, Iris Elena Flores, and they have two sons and one daughter. Elvir speaks Russian and some English.

7 (C) Zelaya's selection of Elvir as his representative to Cuba was a surprise as the President passed over experienced diplomats and government officials to choose an unknown who has no links to Cuba. Elvir appears though to possess two qualities that made him ripe for the job: he has known Zelaya for many years and has his confidence, and while careful to state he is not a communist, he is sympathetic to Cuba and its socialist regime, and thus acceptable to the Cuban government. He claims to be a centrist and his goals are "to work for a more just society where economic development benefits everyone." While stating that his role is to represent the people of Honduras he refuses to say whether he is pro- or anti-Castro, Elvir admitted he has been an admirer of Castro and Che Guevara, and that as a youth he was drawn to the socialist goals espoused by the Cuban government. When asked if he was worried the USG would cancel his tourist visa because of his new position, Elvir stated that he did not fear retaliation from the USG because he has never done anything illegal and has never been involved in corruption.

18. (U) COMMENT. The visit by Cuban Foreign Minister Roque marks another step in the developing relationship between Honduras and Cuba. Cuba gained a foothold following the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 by sending medical personnel to provide treatment to injured Hondurans. Those doctors have never left and three hundred of them continue to be the only medical providers for many of the poorest Hondurans in remote areas. Cuba offers hundreds of scholarships to study medicine in Havana and is providing

teachers to attack the problem of illiteracy. Cuba has a good reputation in Honduras and is portrayed as a friend willing to help fellow Latin American countries. While there is no great admiration in the Zelaya administration for Cuba's socialist regime (except for the extreme left-wing of the Liberal Party), President Zelaya recognizes what Cuba can offer Honduras and has no ideological objections to strengthening ties with the Cuban government. Zelaya has nothing to lose by these tokens of friendship and much to gain if he can parlay this into a claim that Honduras's influence is growing in the region. END COMMENT.

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